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SIPDIS

FOR NEA/ARP:AMACDONALD AND INR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/24/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [YM](#)

SUBJECT: ELECTION DELAY SHOWS SALEH'S CUNNING, OPPOSITION'S  
INCOMPETENCE

REF: A. SANAA 335  
[B. SANAA 489](#)  
[C. 08 SANAA 1935](#)  
[D. 08 SANAA 1458](#)  
[E. 08 SANAA 1830](#)  
[F. SANAA 324](#)  
[G. SANAA 273](#)

Classified By: CDA Angie Bryan for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

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[1](#)1. (C) The agreement to delay Yemen's parliamentary elections gives the ruling party two more years of power without an election, while giving the opposition almost none of its demands. While poorly received in the donor community, in terms of internal Yemeni politics this was a solid victory. President Saleh achieved it through a deft combination of brinksmanship, reverse psychology and knowledge of the opposition's weaknesses. The details of the process show just how skillful Saleh can be, and how the opposition political parties can be their own worst enemies.  
End Summary

An Agreement Is Reached

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[1](#)2. (C) On February 25, shortly before the constitutional deadline for calling elections, representatives of Yemen's ruling party and top opposition parties signed an agreement effectively delaying parliamentary elections scheduled for April 27, for two years(Ref A). The agreement ended six months of wrangling between the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) and the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP). The signed document (Ref B) shows that the JMP achieved only promises to discuss reform and none of the goals of its threatened boycott set out in its stated "vision" for the election (Ref C). The only "concession" gained by the JMP was the delay itself. Although the result angered the donor community and will likely lead to problems for Yemen in the future, the true victor in the endgame of the JMP's threatened boycott appears to be President Saleh. An examination of how this came to pass reveals a lot about President Saleh's cunning and his opponents' haplessness and incompetence.

Asking For What's Not Good For You

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[1](#)3. (C) Beginning with the president's controversial appointment of the members of the Supreme Commission for Elections and Referenda (SCER) in August 2008 (Ref D), he and members of his party have consistently insisted that the parliamentary elections must occur as scheduled with or without the opposition. At no time, however, was this scenario in the GPC's interest. Although there is no doubt

that the ruling party would have retained control of the Parliament (Ref E), an election without the opposition would likely have been deemed illegitimate by international observers. Even a solid victory in such an election would have been seen as a substantial loss in status to Saleh, who has basked for more than 2 years in the glow of his most recent "generally free and fair" election.

¶4. (C) Further, there is no guarantee that the GPC would not have lost ground. In the April 2008 gubernatorial elections a number of ruling party-endorsed candidates lost to independents or non-endorsed GPC candidates. Losing seats in an unopposed election would have resulted in a loss of face that the very proud President Saleh would have found hard to stomach.

¶5. (C) More importantly, with anti-government tensions bubbling just under the surface in Yemen, a controversial election could have been the spark to set off anti-government protests (ref B). GPC members were aware that battle lines drawn in the confrontation were unusual. GPC Parliamentary caucus head Sultan Berkani began a meeting with POL/E Chief on January 20 by saying "usually it's the ruling party who wants a delay and the opposition who want elections." GPC MP Nabil Basha started a meeting with POL/E Chief on February 2 the same way.

#### Holding Fast to Gain Nothing

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¶6. (C) For five months, the JMP has been directly or indirectly calling for a delay in elections. In November 2008, Secretary General Abdulwahab al-Anisi of the JMP member

Islah party conceded to POL/E Chief that the conditions the JMP demanded for participating in the election were not possible to achieve before April (Ref C). More recently, Secretary General Yassin Said Noman of the opposition Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) told National Democratic Institute (NDI) Country Director Heather Therrien, just hours before the agreement was announced, that the YSP felt that a delay of "up to two years" would be needed.

¶7. (C) Ironically, the JMP could have gotten a much better deal had they been willing to sign sooner. As outlined in the "principles of agreement" circulated by NDI in February (Ref F), Saleh and the GPC were ready to concede to a number of the opposition's demands. Rather than settle for half a loaf, however, the JMP members chose to drag their feet, nitpick over details, bicker among themselves, and line up side deals not directly related to the elections (Ref G). Finally, with the deadline imminent, the JMP found that the magnanimity of its rivals had dried up.

¶8. (C) Almost immediately after the signing of the agreement, the JMP began to try to distance itself from it. Party members decried it in the press and Noman asserted to POL/E Chief on March 17 that the opposition had never wanted a delay.

#### Please Don't Throw Me in That Briar Patch

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¶9. (C) By loudly refusing a delay in the elections and threatening to "go it alone" without the JMP, Saleh may have been deftly using reverse psychology, like Br'er Rabbit in the "Uncle Remus" stories, begging not to be tossed into the briar patch. As early as December, Saleh was sending the message to the JMP through intermediaries that he might be willing to "give in" a little on an election delay, but this was always portrayed as a reluctant sacrifice. Whether or not the president's position was intended as a pressure ploy, it certainly worked as one. Noman told Therrien days after the agreement that he and his fellow JMP members had signed out of fear that the GPC would go ahead with the elections without the opposition.

Comment

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¶10. (C) As it now stands, the GPC will enjoy two more years of controlling the Parliament. Saleh has achieved political gains while appearing (at least on the surface) to have made a concession, even though donor country unhappiness with the delay will likely lead to long-term problems for Yemen. At the same time, the JMP is trying to protest receiving exactly what it asked for, just as it did in 2008 when it rejected appointing judges to the SCER in spite of having championed the idea originally. The JMP stuck to its guns from August to February and put up a good fight, only to lose out in the end to a craftier opponent. They should have been more wary in confronting Saleh, who was "born and raised in that briar patch." End Comment.  
BRYAN